

Yakima County Agricultural Lands Study Advisory Committee  
July 20, 2004  
Meeting Summary

Attending: Steve Erickson, Yakima County Planning  
Anne Knapp, Yakima County Planning  
Kolya McCleave, Yakima County Planning  
Heinz Humann, Farm Bureau  
Leonard Bauer, WA CTED  
Betty Renkor, WA CTED

Invited but unable to attend: Barbara Glover, Wine Yakima Valley; Dana Faubion, WSU Extension.

County planners reviewed the history of agricultural lands designation in Yakima County. The most recent analysis, using criteria based on the WAC criteria, resulted in the de-designation of 4.5 square miles of agriculture land.

The recent bill passed by the Legislature allowing accessory uses on agriculture land addresses some recommendations of the County's Agriculture Lands Task Force, which is concerned about the needs of farmers.

Discussion of Study items

*a) Amount of land designated as agricultural land with long-term commercial significance.*

The County has designated 450,646 acres. The definition of "long-term commercial significance" still poses a problem and does not allow for the economics of farming to be considered. Protecting the farmer, not just the farmland, is a continuing issue.

*b) Amount of land in agricultural production, and c) Changes of amount of agricultural land since 1990.*

The Census of Agriculture has changed its definition of farms and that needs to be explained. The Census statistics do include land on the Yakama reservation. Check with Assessor Dave Cook for data on ag production acres. Check Volume II of the County plan for acres of deeded land on the reservation.

*d) Comparison with amounts of land in other uses.*

Check with GIS analysts for this data.

*e) Designation standards and procedures.*

Planners provided a copy of the Plan 2015 Update and maps of the Planning Commission recommendation and adopted ag designation. Eight criteria must be met for ag land to be de-designated. The entire County was reviewed during the recent process.

For items f through I, we first reviewed the Summary of Comments outlining comments from the Statewide Advisory Committee. Then we discussed other factors relevant to each of these items.

*f) Effect of designation on tax revenue.*

Compare tax assessments for agriculture land in the current use taxation program with assessments for rural designated land. Compare the number of acres designated agriculture with the number of acres in the current use program. How are lands in the UGA with ag operations valued? Yakima County is working with the American Farmland Trust on developing a cost of services study.

*g) Contribution of agriculture to the local economy.*

The Chelan wine industry conducted a study on its contribution to the economy. The Yakima Valley wine association also may have this kind of information. The WSU Ag Research Center at Prosser may have some information about secondary dollar values.

*h) Threats to maintaining the agricultural land base.*

The minimum wage requirement will have a big impact. Some growers will quit farming. Another issue is not knowing when you may be hit with a third-party lawsuit. A local legal agency is suing a farmer for not paying minimum wage although he had provided workers with food and housing.

Regulatory review and complex regulations from a variety of agencies are a problem. Changing from one crop to the other triggers a Critical Areas Ordinance review, resulting in the need for permits. (The County is reviewing this issue.) Critical areas buffers are a threat; 200-foot buffers will kill some farmers. Stormwater fees and regulations may be another threat.

The global economy is a significant factor. The infrastructure that supports agriculture is leaving, and these corporate decisions have local impacts. Del Monte is closing its local asparagus plant, leaving local growers without a processor. It's a difficult issue for local government to deal with.

The complexity of financing is also an issue. Farmers need the skills to deal with financing, and many farmers do not have these skills.

*i) Measures local government should adopt...*

Consumer preference needs to be geared to support local agriculture. A cafeteria to farm program can bring local products in. Stronger right to farm laws are needed. Regulatory measures should include CAO and zoning options for agriculture. Other measures include a Farmland Preservation Program, transfer of development rights, and cost of services studies.

Local government should encourage development within the Urban Growth Area (UGA). The County is reviewing development patterns and seeing little development within the

UGA and considerable development within the rural area. This puts more pressure on ag lands. What efforts are being made to support the residential land base within the UGA? We should define not only how much ag land is enough, but how much rural residential development is enough. Also, allowing cities to plan beyond 20 years would let farmers and the development community know what to expect.

*j) Any other type of information that will help the committees...*

Irrigation uses should be looked into. There is a proposal for a Black Rock dam and new water reservoir for water supply and recreation purposes east of Moxee.